

OVERCOMING Winter INERTIA

Connecting with Nature When it is Cold Outside

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Inertia: *"inertness, especially with regard to effort, motion, action, and the like; inactivity; sluggishness."* - Dictionary.com

Do you and your children fall prey to "winter inertia?" Are you sluggish, inactive, and inert with regard to action or motion in the face of yet another wallop of snow? Feathery leaves of frost paint the edges of your windows and soft mounds of snow smooth over bushes and trees. Birds are huddled under eaves, fluffing their feathers, reminding you that there is every reason for you and your kids to stay inside so that you can nestle in front of a glowing screen, a mug of hot chocolate easily within reach.

But knowing that being outside and giving your children a large dose of vitamin "N" (Nature) is an important part of a healthy childhood, causes us, as parents, to struggle to overcome that winter inertia.

Here are a few simple ways to reconnect both you, and your children, to nature in winter. Overcoming inertia takes energy but connecting to nature gives back far more energy than it takes. You just need the fortitude and gumption to get your kids off the couch and into the magic of a winter's day. Not only do you provide exercise and fresh air, you also help to forge a real and lasting connection between your children and the natural world. As John Muir once said: if we *"tug at a single thing in nature, we'll find it connected to the rest of the world."*

So redeem this very winter day! Grab your hat, mitts, warm boots and winter jackets. Grab the kids, and experience the exhilaration of winter while the air is crisp, sharp and clear. The spring thaw will come far too soon!

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BUILD A QUINSY

This is a survival shelter that has saved the life of more than one Northern explorer. Building one as a family can be a wonderful backyard adventure! When the snow is more than a foot or so deep, dig out some recycling containers and find several shovels. Fill up the bins with snow and haul them over to a central location. Mound snow up as high as you can (a big pile about 5 feet high and 12 feet across would be do the trick). Make sure your pile slopes gently. Use a shovel to smooth the sides into a symmetrical dome shape. Here is an important tip: *You must leave the mound for a minimum of three hours!* This will give the snow crystals time to coalesce (bind). Ideally, leave the mound overnight. After the pile has settled, find a series of sticks about a foot or so long and push them into the mound so that one end is at the surface and the other end is pressed deep into the mound. There should be a stick every 24 inches or so, covering the entire surface of the quinsy.

Next, begin hollowing out the mound. Put on some snow pants and an insulated jacket with a hood: this can be cold and wet work! Use your shovel and start scooping snow out. Have your children haul the snow away from the entrance. Keep digging until you come across the butt end of one of the sticks. The sticks serve as a guide so that you know the walls are of an even and consistent thickness. When the quinsy is sufficiently hollowed out, use a larger stick or your fist to poke three or four holes through to the outside (one overhead, the rest along the sides about 4 to 6 inches in diameter). These holes will serve as ventilation, helping to bring fresh air inside. If I know my children are going to be playing in the quinsy without supervision, I make an extra exit. If you are up for an adventure, insulate the bottom of the quinsy with a tarp and sleeping pads. If you are well dressed and if there is enough insulation above and below you, you and your children can spend a cozy and unforgettable night in a snow fort of your own creation.

TRACKING AND TRAILING

As I am fond of telling my students, every trail has a story to tell. If you are patient enough you can learn to read the writing each footprint makes in the soft snow of winter. Go to a nearby forest, field or natural area. When you find tracks, follow them. Ask your children which direction the animal was heading (look for scuff marks, usually located at the rear of the tracks). Was it running, walking, laying down? Look for signs of browsing: rabbits have sharp teeth and nip small saplings at a 45 degree angle, deer don't have any top teeth and they tend to tear and chomp overhanging branches and saplings (especially cedar). Red squirrels love to husk cones, pulling off the scales in large piles. Was the animal walking in a straight line (fox, coyote, house cat)? Was it hopping (squirrels, rabbits, mice), or did you notice one larger foot landing beside one smaller foot (raccoon, porcupine)?

The more children follow tracks, the sharper their eyes become. If you are lucky, you can follow tracks right to their source (perhaps a squirrel up in a tree). To further practice tracking skills, use this activity when there is no snow. Take a solid round log a foot or so in diameter and approximately two feet long, and drive in a series of wood screws (30 or so) such that the heads are sticking out all around the log. Attach a stout rope and drag the log in a winding fashion through a wooded area. If you can, hide a small stuffed animal at the end.

The screws catch on the undergrowth, turning over leaves, moving branches and of course, the path of the log leaves a distinctive trail. The screws mimic the movement of claws and feet through the underbrush. Have your children attempt to follow the trail until they find the hidden stuffed animal. As your kids become more keen and adept, begin to remove some or all of the screws. This makes the challenge of following the log trail that much more difficult. You are teaching your children the fine art of trailing! Use this technique as a way of discovering signs of an animal's passage. Overturned leaves, bent grasses, scraped moss, disturbed earth, scat (animal droppings) and browse marks (claw marks, hair) are all sure signs of an animal passing through.

For added adventure, try a tracking stick. Use a ¾ inch dowel about 2 feet long and attach two hair elastics, one for either end. If you find tracks in the soft mud or snow, slide the hair bands on the tracking stick so you can measure the stride of the animal (the distance between the paw prints from the heel of one to the heel of the next paw print ahead). Once the tracks leave the mud or snow, flip the tracking stick over and this will tell you where the next paw print *should* be. Look for subtle disturbances (bent grass, scratches etc.). Follow the trail as far as you can. Who knows what amazing stories are written in the soft snow and woods that are just waiting for someone like you to follow, read and appreciate them! •



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